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Project Review: Museum partnerships, virtual reality and *The Catherine Storr Experience*

Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children's Books, and Digital Cultures in Culture Lab,
Newcastle University, November 2016

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Abstract

This review explores the role of partnership in creating *The Catherine Storr Experience*, which presents the life, work and collection of children's author Catherine Storr through a virtual reality platform. Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children's Books, which holds Catherine Storr's archive, worked with Professor Kim Reynolds, who developed the content for *The Catherine Storr Experience*, and Digital Cultures in Culture Lab at Newcastle University, which provided the virtual reality expertise. Partnering with university researchers has enabled this museum collection to be interpreted and presented to a public audience using cutting-edge technology.

Keywords: Catherine Storr, virtual reality, technology, digital, museums, partnerships

The use of digital technology and museums is a very topical issue. As Adrian Murphy (2015) notes, 'as the use of technology in everyday life has become the norm, integrating this into the museum offer is becoming even more essential.' Yet many heritage organisations lack the

expertise to explore emerging digital technologies. Our digital age therefore poses several challenges to museums: how can collections be presented and interpreted in an engaging way online? Can digital technologies provide the same depth of experience as, or enhance a visit to, the physical museum? How can museums practically manage, resource and deliver digital activity?

Museums are increasingly working with external partners to engage visitors with their collections and spaces through new technologies, such as virtual reality. Virtual reality, or VR, is an immersive simulation of a computer-generated environment, experienced through a VR headset and/or on a mobile device. Carrozzino and Bergamosco (2010) note that virtual reality technologies have ‘been rapidly gaining consent and positive reception... in the field of Cultural Heritage’, and VR is named as one of ‘11 technologies to watch in 2017’ by the technology blog ‘Mashable’ (Ulanoff, 2016).

Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children’s Books aspires to create engaging digital content such as VR, but lacks an in-house IT department to support this. As the Vital North Partnership Manager leading the strategic collaboration between Seven Stories and Newcastle University, I looked to see whether this could be addressed through a new partnership with academics working on digital technologies. The Catherine Storr collection held by Seven Stories was identified as an appropriate archive to explore. Catherine Storr was a psychiatrist turned children’s author who wrote more than thirty books. She was unafraid of portraying the unsettling, saying: ‘I write to frighten myself. If I haven’t given myself that shiver down the spine I know I haven’t brought it off. I was told of at least one child who had nightmares after reading *Marianne Dreams*’ (Storr, 1970: 22). The Catherine Storr collection includes material relating to her 1958 novel *Marianne Dreams*, alongside correspondence, biographical material and original material for several of her other published works.

Kim Reynolds, Professor of Children's Literature at Newcastle University, had conducted research exploring the Catherine Storr archive. Having worked in partnership with Seven Stories for a number of years, Professor Reynolds was awarded funding from Newcastle University to create an innovative online exhibition with Seven Stories loosely based around the story of *Marianne Dreams*, using her own research findings and digitised items from the Catherine Storr collection.

With funding secured, Seven Stories and Professor Reynolds approached Dr Tom Schofield, from Digital Cultures in Culture Lab at Newcastle University, and collaborator Dan Foster Smith, to design and build the digital exhibition. Digital Cultures was identified as an appropriate collaborator due to the research centre's previous work on digital projects using literary archives. Dr Schofield suggested virtual reality as a suitable technology, in terms of both the innovation required and the subject matter. Originally envisaged by Jarod Lenier in the 1980s, virtual reality creates a 'world without limitation, a world as unlimited as dreams' and seemed the perfect fit for Storr's *Marianne Dreams*, a text where real and fantasy worlds intersect (Lenier, 2017).

The result of this project, *The Catherine Storr Experience*, illustrates how working in partnership helped the museum to open up access to a previously hidden collection. *The Catherine Storr Experience* is a virtual reality exhibition launched by Seven Stories and Newcastle University in November 2016. Landing on *The Catherine Storr Experience* website at <http://digitalcultures.ncl.ac.uk/Catherine-Storr/>, the user reads a short introduction giving the background to the project, the partners involved, and advice on accessing the resource, before entering the virtual reality environment.

We are taken inside a virtual reality bedroom, designed and built by Digital Cultures, which is described in the introductory text as 'Marianne's room'. The bedroom has a 3D quality and is displayed in full colour. A piano plays in the background and a voiceover states: 'Doubles,

doppelgangers, ghostly Others and supernatural events haunt the pages of Catherine Storr's children's books.' As the narrative, written by Professor Reynolds and performed by Seven Stories' Storycatcher Elena Joy Miller, gives relevant examples from Storr's work, the books in question appear from mid-air and slowly fly across the room to land on a bookcase (Figure 1).

When this sequence is over, the user is given the opportunity to explore the bedroom for themselves. Photographs from Storr's life adorn the walls and dolls owned by the author appear around the room. These items were selected by Professor Reynolds, and digitised by the Seven Stories collections team. When focusing on these objects or on the audio symbols that are displayed next to them, the voiceover gives additional information about Storr's life and work, and a caption gives specific details about the item. These real objects add to the sense that this is Marianne's 'real' bedroom.

Yet, the Marianne that sits up in bed is a flat black and white illustration, taken from *Marianne Dreams*. As the user finishes looking around the bedroom we move inside the book that lies on Marianne's bed, and into Marianne's dream world which is represented as a black and white environment with two-dimensional drawings of the house and Marianne (Figure 2). Once again, the environment created by Digital Cultures allows the user to look around a ghostly copy of the 'real' bedroom previously explored. The exhibition here moves from presenting biographical material to the literary archive of Catherine Storr held by Seven Stories. All of the paintings on the walls of this world are digitised illustrations from Storr's books and the voiceover tells us more about her other stories. As Marianne tries to escape the dream-world, the user moves back to Marianne's real bedroom. But we keep zooming out; this bedroom too moves away into blackness and *The Catherine Storr Experience* concludes.

The Catherine Storr Experience combines a narrated tour of Catherine Storr's life and work with opportunities for the user to explore the different environments for themselves and find

out more information. The blurred lines between the real and dream worlds of *Marianne Dreams*, the environments designed by Digital Cultures to represent them, and the documentary and textual collections we are invited to explore, have a synergy with the VR technology that the user experiences. As Professor Reynolds' narrative for *The Catherine Storr Experience* suggests, 'reality and fantasy are not different things, but different ways of seeing and thinking about oneself and the world.'

The collaboration between Seven Stories and Newcastle University led to an iterative process of co-creation and co-curation, as the partners contributed their unique skills, resources and expertise to develop *The Catherine Storr Experience*. The resulting VR platform would not have been possible without input from all partners, who report that the partnership process was a positive experience, and are pleased with the resulting resource.

For Seven Stories' Archivist Kris McKie, this project created new routes for Seven Stories' audiences to access this collection: 'It was interesting to see how a talented group of people from outside the museums and heritage sector were able to respond to the challenge of representing an archive in a new way' (quoted in Pattinson, 2016). Without internal IT support, Seven Stories drew on the experience of Digital Cultures, who envisaged how this collection and Professor Reynolds' research could be displayed through new VR technologies. The risk of undertaking this experimental project was reduced for Seven Stories, as the digital aspects of the project were funded by the University.

From Newcastle University's perspective, Dr Tom Schofield and Dan Foster Smith said that working on *The Catherine Storr Experience* had given Digital Cultures in Culture Lab the opportunity to explore 'new and experimental technology, which is on the edge of a breakthrough into the mainstream' (Pattinson, 2016). The project gave them a real application for their research and practice in cutting-edge digital technologies. Professor Reynolds also commented on how the process of creating the resource enhanced her children's literature

research: ‘It required new ways of writing, and Dan and Tom approached the task in adventurous ways that re-engaged me with the material’ (Pattinson, 2016).

Bringing Digital Cultures in Culture Lab onto this project involved an investment of time in building a new working relationship, which caused a minor delay in launching *The Catherine Storr Experience*. However, the project has opened up new avenues for collaboration and the partners will continue to work together on research, teaching and public engagement initiatives. Partnering with university researchers has enabled Seven Stories’ Catherine Storr collection to be interpreted and presented to a public audience using emerging digital technologies. As a successful collaboration *The Catherine Storr Experience* shows how working in partnership can help museums create new digital routes into their collections. The rapid development of contemporary technologies suggests that digital partnerships, or developing internal capacity to deliver such projects, will become increasingly important to museums moving forward, and future research could explore the different ways in which museums are approaching this.

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Images used with permission of Newcastle University and Seven Stories: the National Centre for Children’s Books. Additional items from Catherine Storr’s daughters Sophia Hartland, Cecilia and Emma Storr, and use of original illustrations by Marjorie Ann Watts. Every effort has been made to contact those with a possible copyright interest in material used in this project. Please contact kim.reynolds@ncl.ac.uk regarding any errors or omissions.

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Image captions:

Figure 1:

Marianne's room, The Catherine Storr Experience

Figure 2:

Marianne's dream world, The Catherine Storr Experience